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VOLUNTEERS IN THE COURTS *News*

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Brown County Mediation Center Now Serving Families, Neighborhoods

by: Diane Legomsky

Brown County Community Mediation Center director

A new program at the Brown County Community Mediation Center is giving residents of Brown County a place to turn when family and neighborhood problems seem unsolvable.

The center first opened in March 1999, providing mediation to people representing themselves in small claims cases (see [The Third Branch, fall 1999](#)). In response to numerous requests for services beyond court referrals, the center began to mediate informal disputes between neighbors, agencies, and family members in May 2000. By August, with 25 disputes mediated and a 92 percent resolution rate, the center decided to expand and formalize this new service, calling it the Family and Neighborhood Mediation Program.

The program works to address the impact of unresolved disputes on families and neighborhoods, emphasizing early mediation before positions become too rigid, additional individuals become involved, or violence occurs. Mediators focus on finding realistic, long-term resolutions that address the interests of both parties and on helping craft resolutions that can withstand challenges the parties will continue to face in their ongoing relationships. The program will also facilitate neighborhood discussions on issues of potential or actual conflict —such as proposed developments and zoning issues.

To better ensure its success, the Family and Neighborhood Mediation Program will be neighborhood-based. The center is partnering with Neighborhood Watch, community policing officers, family resource centers, neighborhood associations, and local YWCAs. These groups will refer disputants to the center, recommend potential mediators, and provide a venue for discussing racial and ethnic diversity issues and presenting conflict resolution programs.

The center will train and mentor community members who will mediate within their own neighborhoods, but not on their own blocks. The goal is to train 40 mediators in 2001, and an additional 40 in 2002. The center will also build a network of local resource people to assist in arranging mediation sessions and to attend sessions, offering advice and support. Other mediation programs have found such resource people to be highly effective in creating a sense of comfort and a spirit of cooperation.

The center has received city approval for a \$4,000 block grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and is looking for additional funding.

For more information, contact Legomsky at (920) 438-7067.

Senior Volunteers Working with Justice Programs

A 1999 nationwide study by Independent Sector, a coalition of non-profits, foundations, and corporations, found that almost 48 percent of all people 55 and over perform volunteer work. The survey also found that, if asked, almost 84 percent of seniors will volunteer their time and talents, but in 1999 only 45 percent of seniors were asked to volunteer.

Older adults possess a wealth of experience and expertise, and are more likely to have time to share these gifts with others. Justice-related programs have tapped into this resource, with senior volunteers doing everything from serving as bailiffs in the Kenosha Municipal Court to visiting wards of the court as part of several guardianship monitoring programs. In some cases, senior organizations and agencies are the sponsors and administrators of volunteer programs.

Following are examples of local programs that recruit senior volunteers:

Court Information Desk. The Retired Seniors Volunteer Program (RSVP) of Dane County coordinates, trains, and provides volunteers for the information desk at the Dane County Courthouse. Volunteers direct individuals to the correct court or government office. The Sheboygan County Department on Aging operates a similar program.

Municipal Court Bailiffs Program. In Kenosha, volunteers from RSVP serve as bailiffs in the municipal court, checking in parties and escorting them to the courtroom. The program is sponsored by the local chapter of RSVP and funded by the Corporation for National Service, the State Bureau on Aging, and private donations.

Volunteer Guardian Program. The program trains volunteers from the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and RSVP to act as the eyes and ears of the courts by monitoring guardianship cases (where an individual has been found incompetent).

These programs help ensure that wards are receiving proper care and that their dignity and autonomy are maintained, and they prioritize the well-being of the persons acting as guardians by offering support. Some programs also audit wards' accounts to ensure that finances are being handled properly.

In 1999, a volunteer guardian for the La Crosse County Circuit Court found a \$400,000 discrepancy in a ward's 1998 account. In response to this "red flag," the court directed the guardian *ad litem* to investigate and report back to the court and the monitor on the apparent discrepancy. Fortunately, the investigation turned up answers that alleviated the court's concerns, but the incident demonstrates how volunteers can help the court system monitor guardianships.

Guardianship programs are operating in Eau Claire, La Crosse, Portage, Sauk, and Waukesha counties.

Youth/Senior Mentoring. The Portage County Department on Aging and RSVP run the Grandparent Visitor Program, which arranges for seniors to spend time with young people at the county juvenile detention center. Volunteers are selected for their ability to advise, teach, and impart life experiences without lecturing.

The Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council, Inc. operates a similar program, the Tribal Youth/Elder

Project, where at-risk youth are matched with volunteer elders to help the juveniles develop self-esteem, respect for others, and self-control.

For more information, contact the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services at (608) 266-2536 or AARP in Wisconsin at (608) 251-2277, TTY (608) 286-6333. For information on court-related volunteer opportunities, contact the Wisconsin Supreme Court at (608) 266-1298, or visit the Volunteers in the Courts Web page at www.courts.state.wi.us/media/vol_courts.html.

Networking for Volunteers in Probation Programs

On Sept. 20, a meeting was held in Oshkosh to discuss criminal justice volunteerism and, specifically, the Volunteers in Probation (VIP) program. The program uses volunteer mentors to help offenders complete their court-ordered obligations and learn to cope with life's challenges. The group will meet again on Dec. 6 in Oshkosh.

The conference, sponsored by Outagamie County's Volunteers in Offender Services (VIOS), looked at relevant state statutes, funding sources, and the status of existing programs. VIP programs are operating in Brown, Marathon, Oconto, Outagamie, and Winnebago counties.

"[Mentors] give options and alternatives, not advice ...so [probationers] may make better choices," said Stu Driessen, Outagamie County VIP coordinator. By helping probationers learn life management skills, the mentors hope to make a first offense the last.

According to research by the National Institutes of Health, probationers who are matched with volunteer mentors are 11.5 times less likely to re-offend.

The VIP concept was started in the early 1960s by Keith J. Leenhouts, a circuit court judge in Royal Oak, Mich.

For more information about VIP programs, call Driessen at (920) 832-5248.

To find out about volunteer opportunities in your community , contact Colleen Flesher, program assistant to the Wisconsin Supreme Court, at (608) 266-1298, or by e-mail at colleen.flesher@courts.state.wi.us .

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